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**Abstract:** The author focuses on the influence of philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson on writer Kate Chopin and her book "The Awakening." According to the author, there are a number of similarities between Emerson's "Inspiration" lecture and Edna Pontellier, the main character of "The Awakening." The author analyzes the characters in the novel and the philosophy that informed Chopin's work.

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## **Mr. Emerson Comes to St. Louis: "Inspiration" and Kate Chopin**

When Ralph Waldo Emerson arrived in St. Louis on 6 March 1867, it was to be only one of the several visits the philosopher would pay to this region in the Public School Library series. The library tour was not Emerson's first visit to St. Louis; however, his lectures as a guest of the Philosophical Society were public events that Kate Chopin might have attended. Public lectures at the Mercantile Library Hall were well received, but no attendance list survives, since they were open to the general public (at a cost of three for a dollar).([n1](#)) That evening, Emerson spoke on American Culture; his lectures were popular and widely attended, and the philosophic link between New England and the Midwest strengthened.(

n2) That same day, he presented his lecture "Inspiration" before the all-male Philosophical Society, definitely not attended by any young woman, regardless of her gifts. However, it is possible that the then-seventeen-year-old Kate Chopin, living at the time at 1118 St. Ange Avenue in St. Louis, heard about the lecture or read about its contents in some now-forgotten newspaper and found its message fascinating.( n3) Although Chopin does not record ever having seen Emerson personally, a close reading of Chopin's most significant fictional work, *The Awakening*, reveals parallels with Emerson's talk on "Inspiration" that influenced the intellectual milieu nurturing the young Kate Chopin. The strength that *The Awakening's* main character, Edna, experienced as a result of breaking social forms reflects almost as a fictional template the contents of the essay "Inspiration" that Emerson read to the Philosophical Society on that day in March, 1867.

According to Emily Toth in her comprehensive biography of Kate Chopin (1990), Kate Chopin did read Emerson in her later life and agreed with his theory of "separate, complementary spheres for the sexes" (52-53). However, it is more likely that the early defining influence of her maternal grandmother, Victoria Verdon Charleville, one of three strong women in Kate's life after the death of her father in 1855, formed Kate's ideas about gender roles. Toth interprets Chopin's earlier use of Emerson in *The Awakening* as revealing a "sly cynicism," since Edna came to Emerson "not for wisdom but as a soporific" (53). Toth's evaluation of the significance of Emerson to Kate Chopin fails, however, to take into account two critical considerations: first, that Emerson's influence on the intellectual St. Louis of the mid-nineteenth century was significant, and, second, that the dream state that Edna enters after reading Emerson is a vital stage of consciousness for her personal development.

Two texts on the interrelationship between the Concord School and St. Louis reveal how complex a philosophical bond existed during Kate's young womanhood in her native city. Henry A. Pochmann, in *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism*, explores both the compatibility and the conflict that marked this relationship. Although not always harmonious, the relationship was nevertheless exciting and reflected the burgeoning original thought of nineteenth-century St. Louis. The St. Louis Movement began as the St. Louis Philosophical Society in January 1866, and its members, all prominent figures in St. Louis society (among its notables William Torrey Harris and Denton Snider), adhered tenaciously to the philosophy of Hegel. However, the St. Louis Movement was also in part created by the predominance of New England Transcendentalist thought in the region, "whose proponents the several St. Louisans never wearied of apostrophizing as their masters, even while they sought to transcend them and their program" (Pochmann 15). Clearly there was a battle for ascendancy between Emerson and his St. Louis acquaintances: according to Pochmann, Emerson was well aware of the "epistemological chasm" that separated their schools of thought, and he remained on his guard (55). During a welcoming call to Emerson's hotel, Denton Snider accused the visitor of "seeking to Emersonize us," and Emerson found Hegel "the dry bones of thought" and lacking in substance: "When I fish in Hegel, I cannot get a bite; in addition the labor is so hard in reading him that I get a headache" (Pochmann 55).( n4) Still, the exchange of ideas and lecturers between the St. Louis Movement and the Concord School of Philosophy continued for two more decades, Emerson maintained an "auxiliary" membership in this Society (Pochmann 61).( n5) It seems quite unlikely that the young Kate Chopin, so aware of her surroundings and her relationships, was unaffected by the intellectual ferment caused by this contemporary philosopher.( n6)

Despite Toth's dismissal of Emerson's significance to Chopin, several modern critics have investigated the similarities and differences between the two writers, most notably in Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening*, in which Edna Pontellier's spiritual and physical awareness is examined against the backdrop of an ordered and repressive society. John Carlos Rowe shares Toth's view that Emerson was not a positive force in Edna's development but rather served to increase alienation between Edna's society and her growing sensitivity to her own body (134). Martha Fodaski Black considers, in her article "The Quintessence of Chopinism," that Edna's choice of Emerson indicates her new found "pleasure in self-reliance" (104). In her essay "Finding the Self at Home," Katherine Joslin proposes that although Emerson may have made Edna drowsy, she remains restless because she is in a state of self-discovery (175). Barbara Ewell argues that Emerson's influence on the whole of American thought was considerable: "Emerson represents an important dimension of the nineteenth-century version of the American Dream" (158). Perhaps the most relevant, Deborah E. Barker, in "The Awakening of Female Artistry," explores whether Edna does "wake up to the full light" of the Transcendentalists (represented by Emerson's *Nature*) (76-78). Even a brief review of one critical text evaluating the influences on Kate Chopin's writing suggests that Ralph Waldo Emerson might have inspired her own philosophical development. An examination of St. Louis history confirms that possibility. A reading of *The Awakening*, however, proves that the novel can inform our reading of Emerson's work as well.

*The Awakening*, published on 22 April 1899, tells the story of Edna Pontellier, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who realizes that she no longer loves her husband Léonce, despite the fact that other women consider him "the best husband in the world." (n7) Indeed, Léonce does provide Edna with a beautiful house on New Orleans' fashionable Esplanade Street and beautiful possessions. The problem is that he considers his wife one of his belongings, "a valuable piece of personal property" (4). That summer at a cottage on Grand Isle, Edna most acutely feels the emotional and physical restraints of her marriage. She learns how to swim, though she had felt "dread" while in the water all that summer, creating a spiritual bond between herself and the sea that will intensify her awareness. She begins to express herself artistically through her painting (a habit which, after she returns to the city, will lead her to neglect her social obligations and drives a deeper divide between her and her husband). She falls in love with another man, Robert. She has sex with yet another man, Alcée Arobin. All of these new experiences act, for Edna, as a catalyst for new forms of behavior and thought; she rejects the life prescribed for her and enjoys for the first time, as Emerson proposes in his *Introduction to Nature*, "An original relation to the universe" (*Collected Works* I, 7). As though in response to Emerson's advice to cast off the "faded wardrobe" of the past, Edna "had resolved never to take another step backward" (57). Essential to Edna's transformation is her commitment to her art, encouraged by the acerbic yet brilliant pianist, Mile Reisz. So many new ideas come unbidden to Edna, a new "wisdom" that enlightens yet also oppresses her, represented by her learning to swim. Both her mind and her body enjoy the new activity, and she is receptive to that rare occasion when, as Emerson observes, "the intellect is so active that everything seems to run to meet it" ("*Inspiration*," *Complete Works* VIII, 269).

Of course, there rarely exists any literary "proof" that one author directly influences another. Despite the fact that many writers do pay homage to their predecessors, that influence is generally transmuted through the filter of imagination and experience. In fact, we can see how Kate Chopin's later work made use of her own earlier literary efforts. In 1869, when Kate was only nineteen, she wrote a tale called "*Emancipation: A Life Fable*." Running only one page in length, this tale encapsulates the philosophical

creed that will later guide Kate Chopin as a writer. A sleek animal, very beautiful, lives in a cage and has all of his physical needs satisfied. One day, the cage is left open and the "spell of the Unknown was over him." The animal is drawn to the "Light." He suffers trying to survive, and his strength is tested. His coat is torn. Yet he never returns to the comfort of the cage (The Storm 21). Like the animal in the fable, Edna Pontellier is also drawn to the light of awareness, and she reminds Dr. Mandelet of "some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun." Edna refuses to be caged in her husband's house and moves out, preferring her own "pigeon house." She feels spiritually uplifted despite her descent down the "social scale": "every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual" (94). In his lecture, Emerson addresses the positive force of mystery that underlies inspiration as well as the potential cost to the "poet" or "scribe" of the creative spirit. Although there would be a price to pay, all artists, according to Emerson, can recall experiences in which they transcended their own talents, "--when a light, a freedom, a power came to them which lifted them" to superior achievements ("Inspiration," Complete Works XIII, 277). Although Chopin does not imply that Edna is a great artist, she does clearly believe that her recognition of her own talent is a powerful moment in her enlightenment.

One piece of direct evidence, and one that clearly reveals that Kate Chopin was impressed by Emerson's ideas less than a decade before the publication of her novel, surfaces in her letter to the Natchitoches Enterprise, dated 9 December 1890. Although she was writing to correct a "misconception" about her novel *At Fault*, she might have been projecting her future moral stance about Edna Pontellier: "Emerson says: 'Morals is the science of substances, not of shows. It is the what and not the how'" (Private Papers" 202). Even in her relationship with Robert, at first, we see that Edna has an aversion to flippancy that violates her moral code: "It was understood that he had often spoken words of love to Madame Ratignolle, without any thought of being taken seriously. Mrs. Pontellier was glad he had not assumed a similar rôle toward herself. It would have been unacceptable and annoying" (13). At the end of the novel, however, during their final meeting, it seems as though Robert has abandoned his bourgeois morality. He declares that "religion, loyalty, everything would give way if only you cared" (106). (n8) But Edna had already heard what she dreaded to hear--that Robert was really as superficial as she had feared: "Your wife! ... You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not" (106-107). It is clear to Edna that Robert cannot make that leap of vision with her. Her use of the diminutive as well as a maternal tone reveals the final quality of their relationship, and Edna is quite aware that she already has too many children. She "began to look with her own eyes, to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life" (94). Conquering her fear of the sea prepared Edna to confront those other undercurrents that threatened to direct her existence if she were not vigilant.

Kate Chopin was accused of writing a sordid novel, a novel that dealt with issues that should remain undiscussed, immoral and unhealthy (Kate Chopin 21). Actually, she was writing her own fictional manifesto of a woman in the process of developing her own moral system "of substances, not of shows." Much has been debated about the reception of *The Awakening*, including letters that provide evidence that women were very affected by the confirmation of other women who shared their sense of desperation (*The Awakening* 145-158; *Miscellany* 130-136).

Many critics have written about the shift in Edna's relationship with her husband Léonce, who begins to "wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally" (57), which indeed she was.( n9) We can also see this imbalance in her relationship with Addle Ratignolle, a woman of sumptuous beauty to whom Edna is physically attracted. In the space of a page, Addle transforms from a "faultless Madonna" to "some sensuous Madonna," as Edna begins her journey from a life of conventional labels toward a new manner of seeing. Mme Ratignolle is an image of perfection, and although Edna is seduced by that vision initially, she ultimately realizes its hollowness. Why can't she be more like Mme Ratignolle, Léonce wonders, "because she keeps up her music, she doesn't let everything else go to chaos." Edna (who had "resolved never to take another step backward") had no envy of the woman who appeared so happy. Ultimately, she feels pity for Adèle's "colorless existence" that did prevent anguish but also precluded "life's delirium" (56). Edna opens the door wide and welcomes chaos in.( n10)

Edna's relationship with Addle had revealed to her, perhaps subconsciously, that she did care about one thing above all--being truthful. She became intoxicated with the freedom of hearing her own voice express the "unaccustomed taste of candor" (20). At the first dawning of awareness, Edna is frightened by these new thoughts, but she is powerless to stop them. Her sensitivity to the sea and the world around her makes her acutely receptive to the truth: "A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,--the light which, showing the way, forbids it" ( 14). This is the same receptiveness, as Emerson writes in "Intellect," that prepares the mind to receive the truth: "Then, in a moment, and unannounced, the truth appears. A certain, wandering light appears, and is the distinction, the principle we wanted. But the oracle comes, because we had previously laid siege to the shrine" (Collected Works II, 197). Edna lays siege to the shrine of convention. She may not always feel like painting, she says, so she will paint now. She will now fully appreciate the music of Mlle Reisz: "Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her body was being tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth" (27).( n11)

Morality (or perhaps "propriety" would be a better word) was a topic very much on the mind of the young Kate Chopin. Her commonplace book, now in the library of the Missouri Historical Society, details how bored she was with fulfilling social obligations and commitments on New Year's Eve of 1868: "I write in my book to day the first time for months; parties, opera, concerts, skating and amusements ad infinitum have taken up all my time that my dear reading and writing that I love so well have suffered much neglect" (94)...( n12) More than a year later, she was still suffering from the same sense of moral isolation and ennui: "I dance with people I despise; amuse myself with men whose only talent lies in their feet; ... and arise in the middle of the next day feeling infinitely more, in spirit and flesh, like a Liliputian, than a woman with body and soul" (126-127). Thirty years later that feeling would re-emerge as the force that compels Edna to abandon social custom. It is no surprise that she refuses to receive visitors on Tuesday, as she has done "religiously" since her marriage six years prior. As Léonce reads through the cards the visitors have left, he uses each one as an indicator for Edna's behavior to further his own social pretensions and business goals. Léonce loses patience with Edna, at first "bewildered," then "shocked," and finally "angered." His wife does not respond with the accustomed "tacit submissiveness" he has come to expect but rather grows "insolent" (57). She simply does not submit any longer: "Conditions would some way adjust themselves, she felt; but whatever came, she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (80). It is self-reliance that Edna yearns for, not dependence on another. She is learning, as well as a woman of her society can, to live "wholly from within," as Emerson proposes in "Self-Reliance." Such a life, he writes, is independent from the

"sacredness of traditions" (Collected Works II, 30). Léonce's grand house on Esplanade Street represents those tired symbols of dogma, seeming to Edna like "some forbidden temple in which a thousand muffled voices bade her be gone" (84).

In an early conversation with Adèle, Edna recollects herself as a young girl, the image really more of a musing, suggesting to her that she might have been "running away from prayers... read in a spirit of gloom" (18). Even as a child, Edna reacted against convention. Much is revealed about her through an examination of her recollections and daydreams. We know that her early imaginings of men were romantic and stereotypical--a cavalry officer who visited her father when she was a child, a beau of her sister's who never noticed her, a tragedian whose picture she kissed "passionately"-- but they "went the way of dreams" (19), and she married Léonce instead, an "accident." She closed the door on romance and dreams, she felt, and took her time-honored place as "the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her" (19). But we have seen that worship is not an integral part of Edna's nature or behavior. She eventually comes to have disturbing dreams, leaving her with the sense of "something unattainable" (33). Perhaps it was about then that Edna began to read Emerson and find a spirit of empathy there: "Our dreams are the sequel of our waking knowledge," Emerson wrote in "Spiritual Laws" (Collected Works II, 86). Even if reading Emerson did make her drowsy, it might have been those dreams that impelled Edna to action. He writes in "Inspiration" that sleep is valued for the healthy condition it encourages, but equally because it brings dreams, "into whose farrago a divine lesson is sometimes slipped" (Complete Works VIII, 280). Clearly, rather than enervating her, Edna's dream state provided her with salutary creative energy.

Ultimately, it is the clash between her two states--one captive and one free--that leads Edna to her final destiny. The dreams that have nourished her illusions prove false when Robert proves so, and she tells Dr. Mandelet, "The years that are gone seem like dreams--if one might go on sleeping and dreaming--but to wake up and find--oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, than to remain a dupe to illusion all one's life" (110).<sup>(n13)</sup> So of course the real tragedy of the novel is the impossibility of Edna's ability to reconcile the forces that assailed her. She had no choices, and she was aware that in her present circumstances her life would merely be a succession of unsatisfying lovers (113).<sup>(n14)</sup> She feels some guilt over leaving her children, but it is a meaningless future that scares her most of all. Emerson writes that what we dream might reflect our realities, but they can never be the more threatening of the two. An old man comforts his boys frightened by a shadow: "My children, you will never see anything worse than yourselves" ("Spiritual Laws," II, 86). Trapped by the new self she has come to recognize as hers, Edna's final confrontation is with those old dreams that have always haunted her and that she will tragically never be able to replace with a satisfying reality. That realization, however, does not coerce Edna into accepting her life as it presently is, enjoying the material pleasures she has denounced. In the end, Edna "dares and defies," though the effort costs her her life.

It is for Edna as though she is acting upon Emerson's words about inspiration: "When the spirit chooses you for its scribe to publish some commandment," action is inevitable, regardless of the consequences. "The moth must fly to the lamp, and you must solve those questions though you die" (Complete Works VIII, 291-292). Anna L. Moss, in her letter (dated 25 June 1899) to her friend Kate both sympathizes with Chopin's compulsion to tell the truth and reveals her awareness of Emerson's influence. Mrs. Moss encourages her friend to ignore the "tyranny of the unimportant"--the negative reviews of the novel--and

to "accept Emerson's dicta," valuing the whole against the particular (Kate Chopin Miscellany 137-139). (n15) It is clear from this letter that Kate Chopin would understand exactly what her friend meant by her reference.

No writer is without her influences, and Kate Chopin freely admitted her own. (n16) Perhaps in the man-centered, nineteenth-century world inhabited by both Kate Chopin and Ralph Waldo Emerson there was some meeting of the minds that transcended gender. Certainly, Mlle Reisz would agree with what Emerson said in his lecture on "Inspiration," delivered before the Philosophical Society on 6 March 1867: "Artists must be sacrificed to their art. Like bees, they must put their lives into the sting they give" (Complete Works VIII, 274). How interesting that the final sound that fills Edna's mind is "the hum of bees."

## Footnotes

(n1) See Charles van Ravenswaay, "St. Louis in the 1850's," p. 323, for a list of lecture titles delivered in St. Louis by Emerson. When Emerson visited St. Louis on 30 December 1852, it was an exceedingly cold evening, but 2,000 people attended the lecture in spite of the weather and the local productions of *Macbeth* and *Othello*. The Mercantile Library hosted Henry Ward Beecher, Mark Twain, and Lucy Stone, among others, as well.

(n2) See Napton Diary typescript at the Missouri Historical Society library about the 12 March 1867 talk at the Mercantile Library Hall: "A gentle man present thought the short lecture he [Emerson] read rather abstruse [sic] and dull."

(n3) See note following Emerson's letter to Frederick Henry Hedge, 26 March 1867: "The Commonwealth of Mar. 30, 1867, printed a report from St. Louis dated Mar. 20--an 'imperfect abstract of Emerson's lecture here before the Philosophical Society, and some fragments of the conversation which followed" (Letters 5: 514). Clearly, written accounts of Emerson's lectures did exist in the popular press.

(n4) See note cards of Charles van Ravenswaay in Missouri Historical Society library, n.d., about Emerson's reading of "Inspiration" to the Philosophical Society, whose members "proceeded to dethrone" Emerson, "to put truth and Hegel in his place," according to Snider's recollections. Because Emerson was used to being "the centre of attention," Snider implies, this was not a pleasant experience for him: "They did not wish to see or hear me at all, but that I should see and hear them," he wrote to the elder Henry James. [See actual letter dated 4 April 1867 in which Emerson had not felt at all snubbed but rather that it was "the easiest duty & the greatest relief" (Letters 5: 513-514)].

(n5) Denton Snider later wrote an analytical and appreciative biography of Emerson, in which he claims that Emerson's cause gained strength from his visits westward. "Indeed it seems that without this renewed effluence from the younger part of the nation, the movement might have wilted in the bud" (Life 256). In turn, Emerson wrote appreciatively of his St. Louis contacts, even writing letters of introduction for William Torrey Harris, addressed to James Elliot Cabot and Frederick Henry Hedge, both dated 18 July 1865. That St. Louis, though still seen as a frontier town, was gaining some ground as an arena for serious intellectual thought is evident from Emerson's comment to Hedge: "I have been much gratified & a little surprised to receive from Missouri so sharp-sighted a philosopher" (Letters 421-422).

(n6) Emily Toth suggests that Kate Chopin may have lampooned Denton Snider in her novel *At Fault* (Kate Chopin 186). Toth also implies that moving back to St. Louis after her husband Oscar's death was made easier for Kate Chopin because William Torrey Harris, Emerson's friend and another leader of the St. Louis Movement [see above, note 5], raised the standard of the city's public school curriculum as superintendent (174). Clearly, the members of the movement were known to Kate Chopin and important figures in the progress of the city where she would raise her children.

(n7) Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, 9. All subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

(n8) Edna had already renounced organized religion, revealing this not only to Addle Ratignolle but seemingly to herself in an early conversation on the beach (see page 9); later, visiting Chênrière to attend mass with Robert, Edna is overcome and must leave the "stifling atmosphere of the church," only to sleep "long and soundly" (36-37). In her final walk to the sea that eventually ends in her drowning, she recalls Léonce and her children but dismisses the thought: "... they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (114).

(n9) To quote Emerson's "Inspiration" on the subject: "Aristotle said: 'No great genius was ever without some mixture of madness ...'" (Complete Works VIII, 279).

(n10) From Emerson's "May Day": "An energy that searches thorough/From Chaos till the dawning morrow;/Into all our human plight,/The soul's pilgrimage and flight;/In city or in solitude,/Step by step, lifts bad to good" (Complete Works IX, 180). It is an interesting parallel between the two writers that "chaos," "solitude," and "madness" (Chopin's "delirium") are considered positive forces.

(n11) Edna names the piece she enjoys "Solitude," though it has another name. A Solitary Soul was Chopin's own choice for the title of her 1899 novel *The Awakening* (*The Awakening* 26 n.).

(n12) Kate Chopin numbered the pages of her commonplace book herself. The entire volume is also reprinted in *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* 9-122.

(n13) See Davis, "Chopin's Movement Toward Universal Myth," for a discussion of dreams as "altered states of consciousness."

(n14) "I see not, if one be once caught in this trap of so-called sciences, any escape for the man from the links of the chain of physical necessity. On this platform, one lives in a sty of sensualism, and would soon come to suicide" (Emerson, "Experience," *Collected Works* 32). See also *The Awakening*: "He [Arobin] had detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom" (105).

(n15) Ironically, it is just this inability to see the "panorama" that clouds the creative mind, according to Emerson's "Inspiration"; the "fugitive sparkles" he refers to seem to be the same enlightening but incomplete perceptions that frustrate Edna at the end of the novel (*Complete Works* VIII, 273). However, as Emerson continues in "Experience," though we would keep "these beautiful limits ... of known cause and effect" for the sake of our comfort in familiarity, "there must not be too much design" (*Collected Works* 39). Both writers were clearly aware of the pull of oppositional forces that both inspired and

*frustrated the creative spirit.*

(n16) In her "Impressions," dated 1894, Chopin considers Sarah Orne Jewett worthy of study for her "technique and nicety of construction" but will not suggest Mary E. Wilkins Freeman because "She is a great genius and genius is not to be studied." She considers the latter author's *Pembroke* "the most profound, the most powerful piece of fiction that has ever come from the American press," but she disparages the critics who have no feeling for the "spirit of the work, the subtle genius which created it." The same comments will be said about her after the appearance of *The Awakening* (Miscellany 90; 96).

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Kate O'Flaherty Chopin: Carte de visite photograph by J. A. Scholten, 1869, courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The Mercantile Library, where Emerson spoke in St. Louis Courtesy of Campbell House Museum, St. Louis, Missouri

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): *The Awakening*: Original oil painting by Heidi Schneider

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